The Horse versus Automobile Controversy

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Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad ran its line from Peoria to the Indiana border. From the time of the town's founding, horses played a crucial role in farm and city life.

On the farm, horses were used to pull agricultural implements, including plows and planters. Several Fairbury men imported horses from Europe and sold them to area farmers. John Virgin imported large Percheron draft horses from France and sold them in Central Illinois. There were several livery stables and blacksmith shops in Fairbury to support the horses.

The agricultural industry took much longer to transition from horses to tractors versus city dwellers adopting automobiles. In 1917, one hundred thirty-two Fairbury farmers had purchased cars. Only nine Fairbury farmers had purchased nine tractors. Horses continued to be used on Fairbury area farms into the 1940s.

For city residents, horses were used primarily to move freight and transportation. Many houses had a small barn behind them, where the horses lived. Many of these small barns were eventually converted to garages for automobiles.

In 1907, the Illinois state legislature passed the Motor Vehicle Act. This law required that all motorists pay a one-time $2 fee per vehicle. After paying the fee, the motorist received a circle aluminum seal with a registration number to affix to the car, known as a dashboard disc. In 1907, only 12,000 vehicles were registered with the Illinois Secretary of State's office. By 1919, the number of car owners exploded to 478,400 total vehicles. This car adoption rate represented a 36% compounded annual growth rate in car ownership between 1907 and 1920. By 1920, most Fairbury city residents had traded their horses for automobiles.

Sometime before 1901, William Jennings Brethard became the first Livingston County resident to purchase an automobile. Unfortunately, the year of the purchase and the model are unknown. W. J. Bethard was a prominent businessman in Fairbury. He operated a department store on the east end of Fairbury that competed with Walton's Bros. store.

The mention of an automobile being purchased in the Blade was in June of 1901. The Blade recounted that H. J. Ramsey had bought a new Stanhope, and he traveled back and forth between his store and house in grand style.

The Blade also published an article recounting the July 4, 1904 parade. There were three automobiles in that parade. T. S. O. McDowell owned the first car. Mr. McDowell was

dressed as Uncle Sam, and Miss Westervelt represented Columbia. Chester Claudon owned the second automobile. In that second car, Chester Claudon, P. J. Hawk, and Palmer Westervelt were dressed to represent the Army. W. J. Bethard drove the last automobile. In the third car, W. J. Bethard's son Fred and Charles Swarm were dressed to represent the Navy.

Initially, there were hundreds of automobile manufacturers in the United States. The early cars were costly. Because of their high cost, the first owners of automobiles were usually doctors or wealthy businessmen. The doctors were eager to replace their horses and buggies with a car to make their house calls to patients. A typical 1907 automobile had a price of about $850. This price would be equivalent to about $23,611 in today's dollars. By 1925, Henry Ford's Model T reduced the price to $300, or about $4,450 in today's dollars.

Early automobiles were powered by steam, battery power, or gasoline internal combustion engines. It took a few years before the industry settled on using only gasoline-powered vehicles.

Of the ten Illinois license plates issued to Fairbury citizens in 1907, seven automobile owners were businessmen, two were medical doctors, and one was a veterinarian. Three of the ten cars were Maxwell's, and seven different manufacturers made the rest. This 1907 information illustrates that early automobiles were too expensive to be owned by the ordinary working man, and there were hundreds of car manufacturers. Henry Ford's 1908 introduction of the low-cost Model T dramatically increased car ownership became the everyday working man could afford these products.

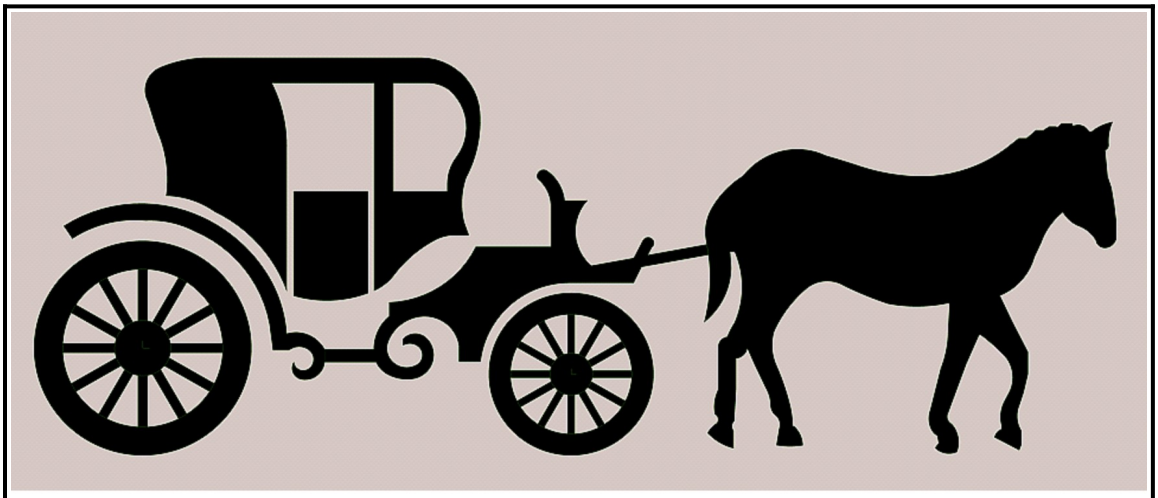
Today, human nature causes automobile drivers to automatically slow down when they see an accident on the road. This phenomenon is often called "rubbernecking" and often causes traffic jams which are described as "gaper's block" or "gaper's delay" as drivers slow to see what happened in a crash.

By 1909, there were many interactions between horse-drawn buggies and automobiles. Often the horse became "spooked" and became uncontrollable. These increasing interactions caused the Editor of the Blade to write a column about this dilemma.

The Editor noted that a natural reaction occurred when a horse-drawn vehicle encountered an automobile similar to modern rubbernecking. The driver of the horse-drawn vehicle would first direct the horse to pull the vehicle on the edge of the road. Then the driver would release the reins and watch the approaching automobile. Because the horse no longer felt any tension on his reins, he would often decide to go into the ditch or, even worse, swerve in front of the approaching automobile. The Editor suggested that all drivers of horse-drawn vehicles keep tension on the reins whenever they encounter a car.

By 1920, almost all the horses in the village of Fairbury were replaced with automobiles. The livery stables closed, and blacksmiths converted their business from supporting

horses to repairing cars. Encounters between farm horses and automobiles continued until tractors replaced all the horses in the late 1940s.



Horse and buggies were a common sight in Fairbury until about 1920